

RETROSPECTIVE ON THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

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RICHARD E. NEUSTADT.

Gentlemen, we have a chance to spend a little time looking back on the Cuban missile crisis as a whole and I'm trying to get you to free associate about lessons you want to draw from it. If you decide you haven't got any lessons, I'll ask some more questions. But a breather from my questions. I'll give you a chance to generalize a bit, retrospecting the thing. Let's start with you, Mr. Secretary.

DEAN RUSK:

To me the overwhelming lesson to be drawn from the Cuban missile crisis is that governments, and particularly the governments of the two nuclear super powers must do their best to try to avoid such crises because ^{they are} it ~~is~~ so utterly dangerous.

I've never met a demogod or a superman. I've seen a lot

of ordinary human beings carrying major responsibilities, grappling with the circumstances in which they find themselves, but human beings with feet of clay. And now that such terrible destruction is operationally possible, we must find ways to back off and not let such crisis appear.

One small illustration of that. During the Cuban missile crisis, ^{Pres Kennedy} and his senior advisors were pretty cool and pretty calm throughout the entire exercise. But we sustained a crisis at a very high level of intensity for some thirteen days. How long can human beings sustain a crisis at that level before sleeplessness, weariness, fear of the unknown, suspicion, ^{and} accident begin to play a role?

So I hope that both Washington and Moscow learned that we must back away from such crisis and not let them develop.

I think it's true that after the Cuban missile crisis both Washington and Moscow were somewhat more prudent than they were before the crisis occurred. But is this a lesson that is automatically transmitted from one generation to the next ^{generation} of leaders who appear on the scene in our major countries? I wish I could be sure of that. But I hope that future leaders in both countries will reflect upon these things and take care.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Mac Bundy has said on a couple of occasions publicly that the crisis might have been avoided, this particular crisis, might have been avoided. You haven't particularized on that-

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

Well, the--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

To follow up this comment a little, what could have been done Mac?

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

Well I think the point I'm making when I say that, and I'll explain it in a moment is very close to the mainline of the argument that the Secretary has just made which I strongly agree with, that the primary point about the missile crisis is how dangerous that kind of confrontation between the super powers is in the period of--the age of thermonuclear weapons, which we're in and not going to get out of for a long time if ever.

When I say that there were miscalculations, it could have been avoided, I think it's fairly obvious that there was a Soviet miscalculation. Krushchev clearly did not enter into this enterprise with the object of being required to withdraw the missiles under American pressure, so that it

didn't come out the way he intended it. And he plainly failed to understand how unacceptable the effort to place those missiles in Cuba would be from the point of view of the United States government and the American people.

So he made a gross miscalculation. But we also made a miscalculation because we did not expect him to do this, we surely thought he would not because we knew what it would mean to us. And so by the time we were aware that this was a possibility on which our position should be made plain, which is more or less September, and issue the grave warnings that we discussed earlier, the President stating publicly that if it were to be that way, different from what he then expected, if it were to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Uh huh.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

But to say that in September when the military plans are afoot and the ships are on the way and the digging has probably just begun, is very different from to say it let us say six months earlier before a Soviet decision has been taken because then the clear exposition of an American position would be a part of the calculation that Kurshchev would have to make.

So that I draw the lesson and I think on this most of us

who went through it would agree that clarity about one's interests, clarity about the things which would raise grave issues, is very important.

There is another school of thought, which is that you should leave the adversary in great doubt and a certain amount of uncertainty is built into the problems of the nuclear age and is an argument for the kind of care and restraint that the Secretary was talking about.

But I don't think, looking back on it, since it was so obvious to us that an action of this kind would have these consequences, that we did as good a job as we should have of making it plain early enough.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

I dragged you into that comment.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

Well I--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

You're entitled--

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

Well I think there are--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

--to a lesson of your own if you wish.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

--There's another very important point, which not everybody

agrees with. I think probably most of us here do. I know the Secretary and I have talked about it, written about it, and I think we agree about it, that when you look at what led to the successful resolution of the crisis from our point of view, you can argue, and many have argued, that it was the consequence of what was then in fact numerically an overwhelming superiority in strategic nuclear weapons.

That's particularly a favorite view among people who think that it makes an enormous difference in this time whether you have more or less or have equality of parity or-- But I don't believe it. I believe, and I think we believed, in the cabinet room as we talked about it and I'm quite confident that the President believed and his belief is decisive here, that nobody was going to make the hideous choice of using nuclear weapons if he could possibly avoid it, that-- although indeed we had a certain superiority-- it was not a useable superiority in the sense that we would ever want to go first because if even one Soviet weapon landed on an American target, we would all be losers.

I think and I believe myself that the evidence is persuasive that what really made it necessary for Krushchev to decide that he would remove the provocation was the fact that he had no choice, no good choice, in terms of resistance to any military action we might take in the Caribbean because

the Caribbean was an area of naval supremacy and of great superiority in every other respect, of conventional forces for the United States, and that decisive point was as plain to him as it was to us.

Now you can argue, and it's important to take into account, you can argue that what made Berlin stable was in part the nuclear balance and I would agree with that. So that in that sense there is a relation between nuclear strength and the question of possible Soviet adventures elsewhere. But as to the situation in Cuba, it was the prospect of a conventional pressure on that island in one form or another about which he could do nothing that made it urgent for him to decide.

Now one must add, and we've talked about that-- I'm going on too long-- that if we had left it at that, mere military pressure, if we had tried to drive him into a corner without taking account of his necessities, we don't know what might have happened. And I'm sure, looking back on it, that those of us who were there when the President made his decision that it was right to give assurances on the question of the Turkish missiles and assurances that if the missiles went out there would not be an invasion of Cuba, that that was the right way to give Krushchev reasonable working room to accept our basic demand.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

If I hear you right, there are two separate strands. One is, one might be put this way:

Mr. Krushchev in his memoirs says, in effect, well, no matter what else happens, how much superiority, no matter what they could have done to us, we could always have taken out New York.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

I don't know why he picked New York.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Yes there is some kind of real--we shouldn't push that one too far. But I--one thing you're saying is the risk that that might happen as the result of a series of steps was something to be avoided if humanly possible.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

Oh more than that--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

From your point of view.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

It was a requirement.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Right.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

And nobody understands this better than the Secretary who can remind us how that was at the time. You just aren't interested in winning a nuclear war. What you're interested in is not having one.

DEAN RUSK:

This is of extraordinary importance in a period in the 1980s when a lot of people are foolishly talking about limited nuclear wars and counter-force strikes and protracted nuclear war that we might come out ahead on, that sort of thing-- just a lot of nonsense going around.

If all of the nuclear weapons that now lie around in the hands of frail human beings were to be fired in some agcnized half hour some day, there would be a serious question as to whether this planet could any longer sustain the human race. Now that's the thing that we've got to respect and back away from.

But on the other hand, I think we can draw a measure of genuine encouragement from this Cuban missile crisis--

Here the nuclear super powers were at each other's jugular veins and we came through it without that catastrophe. I think we ought to take account of the fact that the doomsday talk may also be unrelated to reality. We've put behind

us 37 years since a nuclear weapon has been fired in anger despite some very grave crises along the way. I personally do not believe that the world is filled with crazies on this subject and that those who are carrying responsibilities are going to opt for mutual suicide.

So I'm relatively hopeful. I commented sometime ago that I thought we were further away from a full nuclear war today than we've been in 30 years, and I believe that. But I think that we can draw some elements of encouragement out of the successful navigation by both sides of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

One can underline that by looking at the two individuals. Those of us who worked for President Kennedy were very well aware of his own heavy sense of responsibility and of his determination to watch over the points of dangers as the Secretary said in earlier conversation, like a desk officer. Not simply as a chairman of the board.

And we--I don't think most of us would pick Krushchev as the most prudent and careful and temperamentally stable world leader that we've ever heard of or encountered. And his decision to put the missiles in will not rank as his most prudent choice.

But even though his letter of the Friday was rambling and

went all over the place, it, it did bespeak the deep concerns of a man who did not watch us to tie the ropes that could then not be untied and march toward a catastrophe.

DEAN RUSK:

Remember it was Krushchev who said that in the event of a nuclear war, the living would envy the dead.

Right right.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

And he was very care--the plane that went off, course, the American plane that went off course that you all alluded to yesterday. In his memoirs he says the issue came up to him and he counter-manded the standard orders.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

Both leaders upset their military by refusing to play by military books in that week. And that also is a lesson for nowadays.

DEAN RUSK:

The pilot of that plane that strayed down over Siberia got on the open radio and called back to his base and said hey, I think I'm lost. And he chatted in open radio and the Russians undoubtedly picked that up and decided that he really was lost and didn't shoot him down.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

A very scary affair.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

I'd like to turn to another lesson and one that I think both Ed Martin and Don Wilson can help us with. It's natural that in looking back at this as a confrontation, which it was, between the two super powers, we may let slide the point that another quite critical element in our success here was that on the whole, our case was persuasive to third, fourth, fifth, fiftieth and sixtieth parties and it's a very interesting question what combination of determination and restraint made that effective in different parts of the world and I think it would helps us if we looked at it from that perspective for awhile, because it wasn't just Kennedy versus Krushchev and neither of them thought it was.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Uh huh. Ed. You want to take that first.

EDWIN M. MARTIN:

Well I'd like to take a couple others if I could first--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Well sure. I'll make you come back to it.

Why don't you take this one first and come back.

EDWIN M. MARTIN:

I'll come back because I'll think about this one while I'm

talking about the others--

(LAUGHTER)

A diplomat.

Well, it seems to me that all you've said is correct and both President Kennedy and Mr. Krushchev behaved with reasonable responsibility once the crisis had surfaced. But I do think that one had to conclude that, and there is other evidence of a certain amount, that human beings are not always rational people, and in this case the Soviets made a grave miscalculation with respect to US response, and we have to try to arrange the world in such a way that those miscalculations, whether from lack of intelligence, whether from excess of emotion or for other reasons, don't have too grave consequences.

And this I think points to the ultimate danger of all these nuclear weapons lying around and in every profession, not just in the high levels of government, people make obvious mistakes which are obviously mistakes to others so that I think this is a major consideration when we talk about armament reduction.

Secondly, this was a mistake, a totally unexpected incident, we had the good fortune to have in the United States a president who had the qualities of courage, judgment, sensitivity to the well being of mankind to make, conduct a wise response.

Our electoral process increasingly has been devoted to candidates promising this, that and the other in great detail. At a time when, unless they have been a president and are running for re-election, they are relatively uninformed about what the real problems are what are the obstacles to this or that solution.

And it seems to me that we ought to be concerned about how we can get at the very top an electoral process that would put more emphasis on the personal qualities of the man and how he will conduct himself when in office in dealing with what will for the most part be either new problems, the most serious will be, or old problems about which he will have a lot of new information and have to make new judgments that he didn't have when he was campaigning.

I think this is a problem that both at the presidential and at the legislative level represents a deterioration of the American political process of, cause for deep concern.

Fortunately, we were lucky in this case and President Kennedy had the qualities that were required by a challenge which nobody could have anticipated he would have to meet.

A third, minor point is that it seems to me that, and we've emphasized this in preceding discussion--it is doubtful that we would have made as wise a decision if we hadn't had nearly a week to contemplate what should be done. In other words,

freedom of the press can be carried too far and there is need to have an understanding between those at the top level of government and the press about when publicity is in the public interest and when it isn't.

Now I have no ideas how this would work out. Probably more informally than formally, but we were very lucky and most people think we could not have done it again in the present climate. But it was essential in my judgment to a wise decision.

Now on the point that you have raised--we of course could have probably achieved the same result acting alone without persuading other groups that this was the wise thing to do. We were able to do that I think because the president and his colleagues thought it mattered what the rest of the world thought about what we did and that it may have mattered to the Soviets. After all, they are interested in world public opinion, in spreading their idea of what is the right way to govern a society and I have the feeling that while one can't put your finger on it, the complete solidarity of the NATO countries and even more important, because they had not been solid and were notable for criticizing the US, it was one of their parlor games. They were solid behind us.

THE OAS, you mean.

EDWIN M. MARTIN:

The OAS group.

Yeh.

EDWIN M. MARTIN:

The Latin American OAS group. And this I think, reflected a willingness on the part of President Kennedy, who had been notable in his interest in Latin America-- no president before or since has come close to his degree of interest and the time he spent on it. And Secretary Rusk: Had gone out of their way to establish confidence that they had not just the US interest but a broader interest in them and what happened to them. So that when we needed their support, they felt that we were in things together, had been working together, and this was something where their support for us was the right thing to do.

Now this is partly public policy, but it is almost even more how you deal with people on a person to person basis. And as I've written in the past and said here, I think the patience that Secretary Rusk had shown in discussing this whole situation with the Latin Americans, the ambassadors, the foreign ministers on a number of occasions in the month or so before the crisis, was a major factor in establishing this support which many people thought we couldn't get.

I--let me respond.

You are eager.

DONALD M. WILSON:

I can recall few crises where as it turned out ultimately the support from all parts of the world was as unanimous as it was in this one and I think that was remarkable and I don't think we anticipated it--

Yeh.

--as we, as we worked in that week before the speech was given. In retrospect, I would say that one of the main reasons that came about was first because of the suddenness and the enormous seriousness of the Soviet action and secondly, and I pick up a bit from what Ed Martin just said, the U.S. response.

The US response was measured, it was careful, it did indeed take into consultation our NATO allies and our, and the OAS countries and indeed, as the secretary mentioned in a previous moment here, ambassadors from the non-aligned countries were brought in and briefed at an early point. We tried to bring everyone into our thinking and into our reasoning and we also didn't-- We took a line which I think was probably understood fairly soon thereafter that was the moderate line, the quarantine line rather than a more harsh military line.

And except for what I would regard in retrospect as a blip of public opinion in England and maybe a couple of other continental countries which for a momentary period they questioned whether the missiles really were there and whether they really were offensive missiles--a question that was answered promptly by the disclosure of the pictures-- It was a remarkably unanimous reaction that took place throughout the entire world and was indeed, I think, very helpful to our cause.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

One should underline the importance of those pictures, of the evidence and it's undeniable character. Because if we had been acting even on the most reliable agent reports or on the most careful analytic reconstruction of what must be true, our problem of persuasion in the court of public opinion would have been a lot more serious.

Uh huh.

And when Adlai Stevenson made his famous speech prefaced by his remark that he would wait for the Soviet answer until hell froze over--When he made that speech, the fact that he had blown up reproductions of these pictures and could point to them, drove home a fact which the Soviets had spent two or three days dancing away from in the court of public opinion and it made a great difference.

Now you can't count on that kind of startling and persuasive and to your adversaries surprising evidence in these matters and, like the secrecy of the first week, that element should not be counted on in future encounters.

If I may shift to a slightly different point but a related one. This subject got forced into that form of intense public confrontation because of the secrecy and deception that the Soviet action, but there is a deeper problem which we began to repair in a sense during the second week of the crisis, a problem of communication. And it's important to notice that just as an important detail, the Soviet ambassador was informed of the contents of the speech before it was delivered. The lines were kept open through the week. It was to the advantage of both countries that the ambassador, same ambassador that the Soviet government has now, was a highly trained professional and a man who had learned to communicate effectively--

Certainly with our government and we all believe, I think with his own government. It was also important to use the channel which had been developed since 1961 of direct communication between the President and Krushchev, and it was very important that we were able to formulate our message on the crucial second Saturday in a way that could be persuasively

delivered by a man, the Attorney General, whose seriousness and whose closeness to the President no one could question. So the process of communication between these two deeply adversarial governments is something which we let slip at our peril and which we maintain not because they are charming or because our interests are identical, but because they are not.

DEAN RUSK:

I think it's worth pointing out to those who may have overlooked it that the Cuban missile crisis was responsible for the establishment of a hotline between the White House and the Kremlin in order to facilitate communication at moments of crisis. I think that was a step in the right direction.

I further believe that there is considerable point in Americans and the American government and the Russian government talking things over at considerable length not necessarily with respect to a particular issue or to arrive at a particular answer, but to exchange views on a wide range of things.

For example, the human race as a whole is faced with a number of problems that are different in kind than we've ever faced before-- energy and the environment and the population explosion, the food problems and things like that. And there we are united in a sense because we are all members of the human race.

Now if we can find ways to work together on those common problems, as we did work together for the elimination of small pox, then

it may be that that growing cooperation on other questions can begin to lay a calming hand on these turbulent political forces that lead to crisis. At least we ought to try.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

--to that point which is beautifully exemplified in this crisis but has a wider and deeper meaning. It's of very great importance to us to have not only in moments of crisis, but in all the kinds of complex dealings that we have necessarily with the Soviet Union, to have the advice and counsel of men and women who have given time and often their lives to the study and understanding of that different society. We're all united, I think, in our discussions here in noting the singular contribution of Llewelyn Thompson in the deepest moments of the crisis. His experience, his insight about the Soviet Union were not surpassed by anyone in that generation, and his capacity as a human being to communicate those in a way that inspired confidence and trust in his, in the leaders of his own government, were extraordinary. And that is simply a remarkable individual illustration of the general need that is as urgent now as ever and perhaps a little less noticed. We may not be giving the kind of close attention to the health and strength of our studies of the Soviet Union and of other countries of very great

importance and difficulty in understanding like China.

And I think it's useful to be reminded of that in a case where its value is too obvious.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Well Just to pick that up for a moment, Bohlen and Thompson were the products of the Russian service that got started in the middle 20s within the foreign service. It was a deliberate effort to create a body of career experts. There was a comparable effort made about the same time to create a comparable group of China experts. These were dispersed in the early 50s.

I don't know whether we are now making in the foreign service efforts to take care of the--to create people who can serve the Thompson function 30 years from now with respect to either of these great, mysterious powers.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

Well I think the individuals exist. Secretary perhaps is more familiar with it than I am. But whether there is the kind of respect for deep inquiry, long association and the willingness on a career basis to allow talent and experience in combination to ripen--

Yeh,

--and whether in the wider society, the universities where so many of us have spent so much of our lives, there is the kind of intense concern that one can remember in the first decades after the second war I think is an open question.

DEAN RUSK:

There's one aspect of that that is of some interest to me. Vice President Lyndon Johnson was very actively involved in these discussions, the Cuban missile crisis. He had a number of long, private talks with President Kennedy, just the two of them. He attended most of our meetings and I had many talks with him myself.

Lyndon Johnson had an almost instinctive ability to put himself in the other fella's shoes when a problem came up, to try to at least understand what it was that the other fellow was trying to do and how it looked from his vantage point. I think he probably learned that in dealing with senators in the United States Senate--

(LAUGHTER)

DEAN RUSK:

But I think we must bear that in mind. I think that any good lawyer knows if you really want to understand your own case, you must make a real effort to understand the other fellow's case. And we make a great mistake, I think, if we do not make a special effort to try to see what it is that is moving the other side in a crisis. And Llewelyn Thompson was superb in assisting us from that point of view.

DONALD M. WILSON:

One other point that I think bears mentioning is that on the day the crisis started to resolve itself or did indeed begin

to resolve itself on Sunday, President Kennedy almost immediately told the group that we should not crow, we should not say we're winners, we should not exult, and we did not do that. And I think that was a very wise injunction that he issued at that time to this group. Not only because it gave Mr. Krushchev more room to settle his very difficult problems back in Moscow, but I think also in terms of world opinion it was a very smart course to take.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

It's an interesting point to make and I think you're dead right about it. I don't think he would have anticipated what has happened in some quarters in years since. The criticism from generally right wing circles of our failure to get as much as we should have. And my own view of the teaching value of this new view is that when people, in retrospect, tell their government that it should have gotten more, it would be very helpful if we could transport them back into the atmosphere of the time in which the decisions were being made because the kinds of things that they think we should have done--I'm not sure everybody will agree with me on this.

The kinds of things they think we should have done in terms of increasing pressure on Cuba, in terms of trying to clean up what is obviously a continuing nuisance in the Caribbean from our point of view, are--I would have to say-- absolutely trivial when measured against the risks that were set loose in the world by this crisis.

And I think we were extraoordinarily fortunate to have a president who himself concluded and without I think dissent among his senior advisors, that this crisis was not the time for resolving all the problems of the Carribean. It was a time for getting rid of a threat to the survival of the nations primarily concerned.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Let me pick you up at that point on one thing that I think is important to get out and be clear about and get you gentlemen to comment on.

This crisis is a seminal event in the sense that you draw these lessons and other people who were there at slightly different levels draw sharply different lessons.

That's fair.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

--which have begun to come out now in all kinds of policy advice that is really almost the opposite of the advice implicit in what you are saying. Let me illustrate this:

Shortly after this crisis by, just by accident, I happened to wander into a closed briefing by the vice-chief of air staff for plans.

Who let you in?

RICHARD NEUSTADT:

I was at Rand on some unrelated matter--

And it was the feature of the day. I wandered in.

That's a good question.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

He was giving, he was giving his lessons of the crisis.

This was four months after. And his logic was very clear.

It ran as follows. The Soviets are rational people. They have always acted rationally with respect to the major military problems facing them. The Americans had absolute conventional superiority, tactical superiority in the area, as you have said, Mac, and overwhelming strategic superiority, so that had there been--had it come to nuclear exchange, they would have been destroyed and the United States wouldn't.

Therefore, once the President had publicly committed himself irretrievably in his own terms, there was no risk except for the flap at the White House

And the problem next time is to wall those people off, see.

Now--

Fellow flapper. (Laughter)

Now 20 years later, you know, that translates into-- that's at the base, that logic is at the base of a lot of things; We should have got more. Nuclear superiority is of the essence and so forth. And--oh, this whole set of lessons has been rumbling and developing under the surface now for some time and I want to get you to come to grips with it.

DEAN RUSK:

The General had a free ride on that one because he was making

that analysis four months after the crisis, and that's easy. But anyone who makes the judgment that if you just say boo, the other side is going to roll over and play dead, is making an irrational and possibly irreparable mistake. It's not the way it happens in the real world and this kind of rationale might be an argument for making some increases in the defense budget, but it's not valid reasoning from the point of view of handling a crisis where other nations and other human beings are directly involved who have stakes that may be vital to their own interests. So I don't accept that kind of analysis.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

I do think it shows you a problem that's very deep and one where one should, in line with the Secretary's advice a few minutes ago, take account of how it looks to a man who's saying that. He is a military man. He is thinking about what happens if it comes to a battle. He's not really asking himself whether a politician wants that battle. He's going to win the thermonuclear war. And he's going to lose maybe not only New York, but Cambridge, you know?

And he wins. But the country loses. And if you ask that same man to back up, he'll see that point. I've found very sensible perceptions of the difference between deterrents in war among senior commanders of the Strategic Air Command-- --Same thing about superiority in Cuba. Sure we can win

a war in Cuba. Will we win in the long run in terms of our relations to the hemisphere or even to Cuba itself if we participate in a ground war with Cuba on the pretext that it is required by something the Soviet Union has done? Is that a good long term western hemisphere policy? He's not asking that question.

So that if you take any one professional line in you can get into terrible trouble.

RICHARD NEUSTADT:

Uh huh.

MCGEORGE BUNDY: .

If in that crisis the question of how British public opinion might react on the second day had been allowed to decide matters, we would have done nothing. I think the country, I won't hold a brief for any particular flap artist in the White House--

--but I think the, the country was well served by the fact that we had time to think the matter over, which is another way of saying flap.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Well, and a third way of saying it is your-- is the point you just went over. Political, political objectives in the highest sense of the term, are simply incommensurably different.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

They are different and it reappears now because you get people

talking as if, in a world in which both sides have something like 10 thousand strategic weapons, 500 weapons of this kind are somehow decisive.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Yeh.

Ridiculous.

It really doesn't make any sense. We've known it didn't make any sense for 30 years, political men have--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Eh huh.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

The first description of the thermo nuclear balance of terror is in an extraordinary speech that Winston Churchill gives to the House of Commons in the middle 1950s at a time when there weren't large scale deliverable systems on the Soviet side and very few on ours. But he saw it coming and he understood that it wouldn't make any difference if you had twice as much as the other man if he had enough that so neither of you could ever possibly gain in terms of the future of your own society by starting that kind of war.

Now I don't want to say that the general whom you have not identified and who, undoubtedly, is a splendid human being, misunderstands that. But he isn't trained to bear it in mind at every stage of the decision making process in relation to the Soviet Union. And his assumption that the Soviets

would be always rational is an assumption we don't want any of us to make about anybody else in a moment of very high strain.

DEAN RUSK:

I think I know something about the decisions made by the United States to use it's armed forces over the last half century and I can't think of a single instance in which that decision was made on the initiative of our military. They were not the ones coming in banging the tables, saying turn us loose and we'll go get those fellas. The decisions were made by the constitutional authorities of the country.

Now, the general was not at a moment of decision when he was talking. In between times, they can come up with some pretty fancy talk about this and that and the other, but that's not the way it works around the table when the decision has to be made, so I'm not particularly concerned about the general's view on that.

Give us some more trouble.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

The--would it have made any difference to you do you think in your discussions during that week had the strategic relationship been other than it was? Had, relatively speaking, the United States had been in a position of quote inferiority rather than quote superiority?

DEAN RUSK:

Well, McGeorge Bundy has already in effect made the point that there comes a moment where discussion of superiority and inferiority is almost irrelevant given the total capacity for destruction that already exists. We did not count missiles on each side during the Cuban missile crisis, although the Russians apparently thought later that we had.

The simple fact is that nuclear power does not translate into useable political influence. And that is true among 160 nations around the world and it's, it really is true between the two nuclear super powers because each side understands that they're talking about mutual suicide.

Now I think we would have, we felt and would have felt that we had to get those missiles out of Cuba. And the strategic computation was not one of those slide rule things in which we put all the numbers in a basket and decide ah hah, we have a superiority here because at this level of destruction, discussions of superiority tend to be irrelevant.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

It's really a hard problem to translate when you think about both sides because I think we do feel, I do anyway, in retrospect, that one of the important motives on the Soviet side, hard to balance which is more and which is less important, was in fact to redress what they regarded as a very grave strategic imbalance and one that was getting worse--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Uh huh. Uh huh.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

--because of the building program which we had accelerated which the Eisenhower administration had begun.

So, no doubt that was part of the motivation and the incentive to do that for the Soviet Union is lower now probably, although it's hard to say precisely, the reaction to such a secret move now--one hopes it could not be achieved secretly-- would be different for the very fact that a hundred more weapons are less meaningful now than they were then--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

And this would be perceived around the world--

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

One would suppose so.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

I mean, as part of the--

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

But you know we still have terrible troubles understanding that if somebody has 10 thousand weapons, his deployment of 500 more doesn't matter very much--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Well all right maybe I--

I was going to say listening to Congressional testimony--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

--I take that back.

--you wouldn't think that a hundred made no difference.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

I will take that back.

I didn't say it made no difference in terms of Congressional testimony or even public perceptions--

--but when you get that kind of a grave misunderstanding--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Yeh.

--one which I think myself we now have in this argument over the intermediate missiles in Europe--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Yes.

MCGEROGE BUNDY:

--the task of political leadership is to try to lower the level of misunderstanding. Not merely respond to it.

DEAN RUSK:

Now, a high Russian official commented to Mr. John J. McCloy after this Cuban missile crisis was over, well, Mr. McCloy, you got away with it this time but you'll never get away with it again.

I have no doubt myself that after the Cuban missile crisis, the Soviet Union made a decision to build up their missile forces and take into account lead time and production and

all the rest of it. Some of the missiles we've been seeing on stream in the last few years undoubtedly came out of decisions made shortly after the Cuban missile crisis.

I personally think that is a mis-perception on the part of the Soviets and I hope that that does not mean that they somehow will count numbers and when they think that they have a few ahead, that they will embark upon some adventure that they think they can get away with, because that's the way in which fatal misjudgments can be made.

EDWIN M. MARTIN:

It's an interesting comment, I don't have any reason to doubt it, but we also have tended to brag about our patience with the Russians in settling the crisis that led to the test ban treaty and other progress in the disarmament area.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Uh huh. Let me ask you just one last question. I've always thought it was your finest hour--if there was flap in the White House, I'm glad--

--see, I want to make my own position clear on that one.

But is it your impression that the President had as much control to play the role of desk officer as he wanted and needed?

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

Well you never--one of the things the desk officer finds out, I think, is that you never have as much control as you'd like to have. You have a chance to talk with the people who are

closer to the military management, you will certainly find that there were tensions in that process and you will find that the President himself had a sense from time to time in those two weeks that not everybody was hearing him as clearly as he hoped they would.

There are frictions in any process. This was not, thank God, a war, but some of the fog of war surrounded the movement of forces and the interpretation of messages and all the rest.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Now does this add to his sensitivity about Khrushchev?

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

I think so. I think the point we were making a minute ago, that each of them was careful not to allow standing military response procedures to govern the way in which in fact one responded to an invasion of his territory by an airplane of course and the other to the loss of a plane to missile attack in surface to missile--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Uh huh.

--surface to air missile attack in Cuba, shows that both of them were thinking about how it would be read in the other country. Now that's an inexact art.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Uh huh.

MCGEORGE BUNDY:

--and I just think we have to bear that in mind. And there were, indeed, real questions as to whether, by the standing procedures of all of the surfaces, the signals that went out were in every case the ones that the President intended. But I don't happen to have detailed knowledge because the President had an assistant desk officer for military matters--

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Right.

--named Robert McNamara.

RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Well we'll get to him later.

Mr. Rusk, have you got a final thought you want to give us?

On these matters?

DEAN RUSK:

You spoke of this as our finest hour. I've never looked upon it in those terms. The experience was actually somewhat humbling, I think. We managed to pass through this valley of death successfully. But I think we came out of it realizing that we must not make that trip too often and that we can be thankful that the matter was resolved without a major conflagration and that we'd better be pretty careful about how we deal with these matters and try to avoid the approach to the cliff over which we might all plunge.

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RICHARD E. NEUSTADT:

Well gentlemen, thank you very much.

Atlanta, Georgia, January 22, 1983

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